Cartoon Physics, part 1

*Nick Flynn*

Children under, say, *ten*, shouldn't know that the universe is ever-expanding, inexorably pushing into the vacuum, galaxies

swallowed by galaxies, whole

solar systems collapsing, all of it acted out in silence. At ten we are still learning

the rules of cartoon animation,

that if a man draws a door on a rock only he can pass through it. Anyone else who tries

will crash into the rock. Ten-year-olds should stick with burning houses, car wrecks, ships going down -- earthbound, tangible

disasters, arenas

where they can be heroes. You can run back into a burning house, sinking ships

have lifeboats, the trucks will come with their ladders, if you jump

you will be saved. A child

places her hand on the roof of a schoolbus, & drives across a city of sand. She knows

the exact spot it will skid, at which point the bridge will give, who will swim to safety & who will be pulled under by sharks. She will learn

that if a man runs off the edge of a cliff he will not fall

until he notices his mistake.

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Poetry Explication

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“Cartoon Physics, Part I” Explication

Throughout my childhood, I would consistently look forward to Saturdays so that I could be reduced to a small, unmoving boulder in front of the television to watch my favorite cartoons. While I would have loved to ride a bicycle through a mountain or emerge from an explosion without much more than a newly blackened visage, I realized as I matured that I would never be as indestructible as Daffy Duck. The poem “Cartoon Physics, Part I” by Nick Flynn juxtaposes major, highly destructive events occurring somewhere in the universe to everyday, petty problems of the world. “Cartoon Physics, Part I” employs imagery, connotations of certain words, and allegory to critique society’s ignorance of large, majorly consequential issues.

The imagery of this poem effectively differentiates tragic and cataclysmic events from petty ones. The beginning of the poem speaks of “Galaxies/swallowed by other galaxies” (2-3) and “solar systems collapsing” (4) unbeknownst to anyone because “all of it (is) acted in silence” (4). Entire worlds are reduced to nothingness by forceful and violent means. Furthermore, no one cares to show signs of remorse or regret because no one knows that these situations are taking place, which labels these events as tragic. The poem then goes one to make a suggestion: “Ten-year-olds should stick with burning houses, car/wrecks, ships going down—earthbound, tangible/disasters” (9-11). Catastrophes where destruction is limited are more suitable for children. Because the universally insignificant situations can be combated or solved, they are considered less mature, and thus easier to comprehend than the aforementioned crises. The imagery in this poem, while majorly effective, does not work alone to substantiate the overall goal.

The connotative meanings of specific words suggest that the poem is critiquing society’s knowledge of large tragedies. Initially, the poem employs words with harsh connotations such as “inexorably” (2), “swallowed” (3), and “collapsing” (4). The diction in this section of the poem is rather violent and forceful which establishes an irate tone. However, as the poem progresses, a tone shift becomes evident. As the poem approaches the conclusion, words with a softer connotation are used, for example, “skid” (19), “give” (19), and “mistake” (22). These words shift the tone from angry to sardonic. The connotations of these words at this stage in the poem conjure a mocking, patronizing tone. The tone shift, which is evident with the change of word connotations, adds a layer of satire to the text.

The poem’s use of allegory establishes a critique of mankind’s views on tragic circumstances. The introduction of the poem speaks of galaxies consuming other galaxies and entire solar systems imploding (2-4). The destruction in this section of the poem represents worldwide problems, such as global warming, that are beyond what several individuals are able to manage. Furthermore, these are calamities that are not acknowledged by the general populace. The next segment of the poem suggests “ten-year-olds” (9) are better off dealing with situations in which they can come out the hero. The youth symbolizes those ignorant of the universal cataclysms. The fact that the “ten-year-olds” always become the heroes implies that they are also self-centered and naïve. The conclusion of the poem lists several misfortunes, such as a house caught in an inferno and a sinking watercraft, that the young ones ought to focus on. These events illustrate local, petty problems that are easily solved or defeated because a small portion of the population is affected. These are the events that the majority of people are concerned with because they directly and immediately affect them. The poem’s allegory is the key to deciphering the overall message.

The poem makes use of imagery, connotative meanings of certain words, and allegory to criticize society’s constant willingness to overlook ubiquitous catastrophes for inconsequential ones. The three poetic devices rely on each other to work toward the central goal of the poem. The imagery makes a distinction between the two types of tragedies discussed, the connotations of the words create a shift in the tone that establishes a commentary, and the allegory observes the habits of society. “Cartoon Physics, Part I” not only makes a critique, but also creates a call to action. The poem pleads for the world to forget about their petty, individual problems, and focus on the mishaps that could affect all of humankind at once. While solely concentrating on dilemmas mirrored by those in cartoons can be quite relaxing, paying attention to disasters that affect the entire world is a mature necessity.

Works Cited

Flynn, Nick . "Poetry 180 ." *Cartoon Physics, Part 1*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Dec. 2009. <htt p://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/038.html>.

